

## 14 From Rhetoric to Concept: Incremental Steps for Mainstreaming Gender in the NCCR North-South

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### Abstract

Committed to sustainable development, the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South features gender mainstreaming as an essential element of its scientific foundations. Yet, no road maps are available charting predefined “gender routes” (Mukhopadhyay et al 2006), and despite nearly four decades of experience with gender equity on the development agenda, we are still struggling with gender policy and its implementation. Rhetoric often obscures the diversity in, as well as obstacles and resistance to, applying mainstreaming strategies. Gender mainstreaming must be understood as an ongoing process rather than as a goal. This is imperative for the NCCR North-South programme, whose transdisciplinary global-scale research partnership approach calls not only for embracing diverse (and diverging) cultural and scientific traditions, but also for reconciling power imbalances between North and South. This article argues that strategic leverage points for gender mainstreaming are always given insofar as reflection and learning are an integral part of organisational culture. Gender issues that have unfolded in the programme to date highlight that its open framework for mitigating syndromes of global change is suited to integrating and developing a gender approach. A strong bottom-up movement appears to align with the top-down decisions of the programme management. The process may not have led to a coherent gender concept, but it effected concrete institutional modifications, as well as a more sophisticated transdisciplinary research design and culture. Reflection on the NCCR North-South gender route provides insights that can be useful to design gender mainstreaming policies and strategies for the programme itself, as well as for other development institutions.

**Keywords:** Gender mainstreaming; sustainable development; reflexivity; research; transdisciplinarity; partnership; development discourse.

### **14.1 The challenges of mainstreaming gender in a multinational partnership approach**

The analytical strengths of gender-sensitive research approaches have been demonstrated in countless case studies, while the subversive edge of the gender concept is wearing off (Cornwall 2007). In development policy, gender has been mainstreamed even more comprehensively. This is reflected in key international strategy documents, most notably the UN Millennium Development Goals. Yet, rhetoric often obscures the diversity in, as well as obstacles and resistance to, applying mainstreaming strategies. In the words of Mukhopadhyay and colleagues, “[p]olicies are established but not implemented” (Mukhopadhyay et al 2006, p 120). Development agencies struggle to support gender approaches with an adequate institutional setting while striving to deploy a concerted gender implementation and monitoring procedure (Brody 2009). We argue that these challenges are highly complex in a case such as the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South programme, which operates in the largely unknown field of transdisciplinarity in global-scale research partnerships. Institutional borders are fuzzy and multiple crossings of institutional, scientific, linguistic, and cultural borders call for participatory processes that embrace diversity in values and traditions, but also have to reconcile power imbalances between the global North and South – as well as within a gendered organisation.

In this article, we reflect upon gender mainstreaming in the NCCR North-South. Our discussion is based on a review of programme reports, publications, milestones, and internal documents<sup>3</sup>, tracing institutional changes and conflictive issues related to gender that surfaced in the planning and steering of the programme.<sup>4</sup> We start out on the basis of an understanding that strategic leverage points for gender mainstreaming are always given insofar as reflection and learning are an integral part of organisational culture.<sup>5</sup> In order to give a sense of strategy to the process, we intend to:

1. carve out the elements in institutional planning and steering activities and in organisational changes in the NCCR North-South programme that support the conceptualisation and implementation of gender mainstreaming;
2. detect the underlying conceptual thinking, in order to

3. support the learning process on gender mainstreaming as driven by the NCCR North-South management on the one hand, and the partners' responses and research results on the other.

This implies recognising the international network “as an ‘ethnographic object’ and redressing gender bias in structures of decision-making and institutional culture” (Chant and McIlwaine 2009, p 229).

While it would be beyond the scope of this article to provide a thorough analysis as described in *Politics of the Possible* by Mukhopadhyay and colleagues (2006) – which is a long-term study detecting the ‘gender routes’ of a broad range of partners – we nonetheless repeatedly refer to approaches and results presented therein.<sup>6</sup> Focusing on organisational change for better gender mainstreaming in a research programme means, first of all, to demand accountability on gender issues within that programme. However, the present study goes beyond an indicator-based account. It explores the organisational development within the NCCR North-South programme which resulted from interaction between the management, on the one hand, and the researchers working on conceptual issues and exercising research activities in the field, on the other. Indeed, we argue that – intentionally or not – the open framework of the NCCR North-South programme offered space for mutual exchange on gender that influenced the entire programme. Gender mainstreaming is always a contextually sensitive procedure, as there are no road maps available charting predefined pathways. But we agree with Brody (2009, p 67) that “gender mainstreaming is an ongoing process rather than a goal, and that even the tiniest interim changes should be seen as achievements”. Thus, we hold that reflection on the gender route taken by the NCCR North-South provides insights that can be useful with a view to designing future gender mainstreaming policies and strategies for the programme itself, as well as for other development institutions.

## 14.2 Gender entering through the back door

How did gender become an issue in the NCCR North-South? Originally, the programme proposal had to respond to an organisational condition formulated by the Swiss National Science Foundation for all NCCRs: it incorporated elements for the advancement of women in the description of management issues. In fact, the proposal formulated a dual strategy for gender mainstreaming – a nucleus to build upon later (NCCR North-South 2000, p 88). Nevertheless,

early programme papers written by the researchers (for example Hurni et al 2001) and the project proposal itself addressed negative global trends on a rather general level. A call for modesty in view of the complexity of global change shaped the framework for action and channelled ideas towards projects which were seen as creative, innovative, and fostering participatory processes. These priorities seem to have been set at the cost of a stringent theoretical framework for sustainable development, of which gender mainstreaming would have had to be an integral part (Razavi 1997; McIlwaine and Datta 2003; Radcliffe 2006). Yet, the normative character of the overarching concept of sustainability and the demand for contextuality implied a multi-dimensional approach which was enhanced by the plurality of actors in terms of their disciplinary, institutional, and cultural backgrounds. Participatory processes in a partnership framework were taken as a means to focus on mitigation rather than analysis of syndromes of global change (NCCR North-South 2002, p 77). This opened the back door to a research process suited to challenging power differences within and beyond the NCCR North-South, and, by analogy, to gender mainstreaming. Intended or not: A commitment to partnership, transparency, and accountability would necessarily affect the institutional fabric and process design of the programme itself in the long run.<sup>7</sup> This started right from the beginning.

The first indication of gender becoming an explicitly relevant issue in NCCR North-South research was the inclusion of “Great socio-economic and gender disparities” in the list of 30 core problems to be addressed with a view to mitigating syndromes of global change. A shorter list had been sent out for discussion and revision in eight regional workshops in 2001, prior to the launching of the programme, and this addition to the shorter list was maintained (Messerli and Wiesmann 2004). Thus, it comes as no surprise that it was participants from within the NCCR North-South network who pointed out leverage points for gender mainstreaming at the very beginning of the programme. Open discussion – in the partnership regions and at the programme’s inaugural conference in Grindelwald, Switzerland, in 2001<sup>8</sup> – clearly showed that gender issues were implicitly present in most core problems, especially where inequalities, vulnerabilities, and hierarchies were at stake. Gender was thus acknowledged early on as an issue of transversal character. Accordingly, participants in Grindelwald advocated gender mainstreaming:

*There was a strong demand for gender mainstreaming in the working group, and we felt that gender must be better acknowledged in the organisation. The issue of gender should be addressed both at*

*the organisational level (gender balance) and in project design. Monitoring is necessary to determine whether gender is really a transversal topic everywhere and whether sex-disaggregated data are being collected.* (NCCR North-South 2002, p 86)

The relevant working group suggested linking gender issues to all three syndrome contexts<sup>9</sup> addressed by the NCCR North-South. At the end, it was decided to take up gender as one of four so-called Transversal Themes (TTs) – themes inherent in all contexts (NCCR North-South 2002, pp 92–93).

### **14.3 The institutional response**

The NCCR North-South management centre followed suit by launching two research projects focusing on gender in 2003 and 2004, thus implementing the dual strategy formulated in the project proposal (NCCR North-South 2000, p 88) of (1) promoting the advancement of women within the NCCR North-South network, and (2) elaborating a rationale and ways to enhance research projects focusing on gender. Consequently, a first short-term research project was entitled “Promotion of Gender Equality in a Multidisciplinary and Multicultural Research Context: Development of a Policy Statement and Guidelines for the Advancement of Women in the NCCR North-South” (August 2003 to January 2004). The resulting research report also contained a policy statement and guidelines for the advancement of women in the NCCR North-South (Müller 2004). On this basis, strategies for the advancement of women were applied in the following years. As a kind of surplus outcome, the resulting research report supported the dual pathway envisioned by the management centre combining the advancement of women in the NCCR North-South network with the implementation of gender approaches in research. The NCCR North-South Review Panel<sup>10</sup> concluded as early as 2005 that the programme gave appropriate attention to the advancement of women (SNSF 2005), but that its gender focus needed to be sharpened. The advancement of women has been retained as a priority for the entire life cycle of the NCCR North-South and is internally assessed to be successful, in a technical sense.<sup>11</sup>

A second one-year project entitled “Gender and Sustainable Development” aimed at developing and implementing a gender-sensitive research framework. The objectives seem quite ambitious for a project with restricted assets and a limited time frame: (1) to analyse, compare, and consolidate concepts

and methodologies for gender-sensitive research and practice applied within the NCCR North-South and related to sustainable development; (2) to develop a joint research framework allowing for gender-sensitive research and transfer activities; (3) to implement such a framework by producing, comparing, and disseminating gender-relevant knowledge in different scientific realms and partnership regions; and (4) to contribute to the discussion on conceptual frameworks within the NCCR North-South and to the discourse on gender and sustainable development outside the NCCR North-South. While the internal project report notes that “all these objectives were achieved in the project” (NCCR North-South 2006a, p 12), it is more than doubtful that the project was able to reach the entire NCCR North-South community and establish a common understanding on gender. Nevertheless, the project leaders elaborated conceptual papers to sum up their findings (Premchander 2004; Premchander and Müller 2004).

In terms of research, gender was not pushed as hard as could have been expected from the initial propositions.<sup>12</sup> Gender aspects were mostly absent on the programme level or taken up as an isolated programme component only. In 2003, a first NCCR North-South *Dialogue* paper was dedicated to a review of literature on gender, governance, and environment (Walter 2003), in which the author promisingly conceptualised gender relations as integrated within social and economic organisations and posited gender as a key dimension of analysis. Yet the issue of gender remained ‘outsourced’ to a dedicated work package only. The fact that this review was written in French may be another reason why it was not broadly acknowledged and taken up as a reference within the NCCR North-South community. Nor was another working paper in the *Dialogue* series (Schubert 2005), which embedded gender in political ecology in the context of development research, taken into account.

More resonance for gender in research was generated within a new programme component, the Partnership Actions for Mitigating Syndromes (PAMS)<sup>13</sup>. PAMS are a crucial element for implementing and testing research results with local stakeholders. Although gender was not explicitly addressed in the PAMS guidelines for Phase 1 (2001–2005), the evaluation report (Haupt et al 2006, p 27) identified 11 of 40 PAMS as showing “some gender sensitivity of one sort or another”. Indeed, the PAMS refer only vaguely to gender issues, but the report stated that “non-scientific actors lobbied for enhancing gender balance and age in the trainings” (Haupt et al 2006, p 28) and concluded that

*[...] for scientific, but even more so, for reasons of social justice, the aspects of gender relations and gender bias deserve to be more seriously and professionally addressed within male-dominated NCCR structures and processes. [...] For the sake of both scientific professionalism and ethical commitment, more consideration needs to be given to gender issues.* (Haupt et al 2006, p 28)

Thus we can conclude that gender was issued as a strong political claim by many PAMS stakeholders. The authors of the PAMS evaluation report emphasised the existence of a bottom-up element but also mentioned the need to encompass gender as a scientific and thus more coherent concept. The management centre responded by supporting the development of guidelines for addressing gender in PAMS in Phase 2 (2005–2009) of the NCCR North-South prepared by Bieri (2007). Furthermore, a *gender core group* was established in order to link research projects. This group created a virtual workspace to facilitate exchange on gender issues. The group also discussed gender issues at Integrated Training Courses (ITCs) and Regional Training Courses (RTCs), which provided space for broader discussion with other programme members as well. Aside from the annual North-South Week in Switzerland and regional planning workshops, these training courses have turned out to be crucial platforms of exchange and debate within the NCCR North-South community, as they regularly bring together young researchers and staff from partner organisations. The strategy for the advancement of women was discussed at the ITC held in Kyrgyzstan in 2003, and the 2004 ITC in Switzerland (Schwarzsee) fostered further elaboration on gender in research and action, with a view to developing a joint conceptual and methodological basis.

To sum up, in Phase 1 of the NCCR North-South multiple strategies were applied and a discussion was launched. This helped scholars concerned with gender and reinforced the momentum of gender mainstreaming within the NCCR North-South. A bottom-up movement appeared to align with the top-down decisions of a programme management that helped to steer gender approaches towards a now more coherent overall research programme. Consequently, a book project was launched in order to take stock of experience with gender in development research. Published in 2006 in the *Perspectives* series, the reader *Gender and Sustainable Development* (Premchander and Müller 2006) was an important milestone in pointing out gender achievements in NCCR North-South research during Phase 1.

#### 14.4 Reflections on a mid-term milestone

However, the achievements mentioned above do not say much about a commonly shared gender concept that evolved or was developed along the way within the NCCR North-South community. We therefore ask: What gender concept do the strategies applied reflect? The 2006 reader presented a range of gender-relevant approaches and corresponding results from research projects. Four conceptual contributions to this reader<sup>14</sup> offer an overview of a general debate on gender and development; but what do they reveal about the status and level of acknowledgement of gender mainstreaming within the NCCR North-South research community?

Opening the conceptual section, Gertrude Hirsch Hadorn advocates gender and transdisciplinarity in research for sustainable development on a general level of research collaboration and research design “without presenting simple general solutions for how to integrate gender in research for sustainable development” (Hirsch Hadorn 2006, p 32). Arguing that transdisciplinary research design and culture is suited to driving a social learning process for problem-solving, she emphasises the importance of integrating the attitudes of people, as well as the conditions shaping their positions – such as gender relations – in the necessary learning process. She states that

*[...] researchers, practitioners and stakeholders must be willing and prepared for joint learning in transdisciplinary projects. Their challenge is how to focus and structure their project and how to shape mutual expectancies in order to come up with reliable suggestions for real improvements.* (Hirsch Hadorn 2006, p 40)

Hirsch Hadorn thus directs the focus on individuals, who must be prepared to change their practices and, as part of a learning cycle, to implement, monitor, and adapt them constantly. However, she does not present any strategy for how to proceed with gender mainstreaming beyond this individualistic measure of ‘changing attitudes’. Most notably, she omits any indication on how a research culture supportive of gender mainstreaming is to be developed. How are attitudes to be changed? What role should or could a research institution assume in changing attitudes? What measures could enhance gender mainstreaming within the organisation, and how can a learning cycle be organised? Such questions are not tackled, creating the impression that researchers are left to their own devices.



Much in the same way, the second article in the reader supports gender mainstreaming in research projects but limits itself to addressing researchers – above all natural scientists – as individuals: “In order to foster its integration into a growing number of research projects, the concept of gender should therefore be communicated more effectively [...]. It might be helpful to approach non-social scientists with concrete examples” (Pfister 2006, p 47). In Pfister’s argumentation, gender boils down to accounting separately for men’s and women’s roles: “[...] several examples have shown that understanding the roles of men and women in a particular society *may be* of utmost relevance [...].” and “[...] this example clearly shows the great relevance of gender-sensitive approaches *in certain contexts*” (Pfister 2006, pp 53 and 47; emphasis by authors of the present article). Pfister steers clear of more binding demands or a definite strategy. While acknowledging the need to integrate gender issues into the project cycle and emphasising the success of PAMS, she adopts a pragmatic but rather non-committal and, ultimately, mechanical approach.

The third contribution presents some of the major epistemic shifts in the discourse on gender and development, emphasising “that these shifts are not to be framed in chronological sequence but intertwined, shaping programmes mutually and in sometimes contradictory ways” (Bieri 2006, pp 75–76). This opens up some space for the NCCR North-South process of mainstreaming gender to be accepted as one of many strands of progress towards a coherent concept and practice. Pointing out existing tensions in the general discourse on gender and development, Bieri holds that despite some advancements, “the full engendering of the development process remains one of the fundamental requirements for sustainable development. [...] This includes the critical inspection of gendered processes in which development agents and programme design and planning are implicated” (Bieri 2006, p 76). Bieri turns the focus on a process and its quality, but once again without considering the implications for the NCCR North-South programme.

The fourth conceptual contribution also concentrates on a general discussion of mainstreaming gender and mitigating gender discrimination and inequality. The authors conclude that “[i]ndeed, while a formal agenda encompassing gender equity is now commonplace in the stated goals of many donor agencies and governments, the translation of these policies into greater resource transfers and inclusion of women in planning and design processes, remains limited” (Premchander and Menon 2006, p 111). Emphasising that work must concentrate on the links from the micro- to the meso- and

macro-levels, all in all, their contribution neither takes stock of the NCCR North-South experience, nor does it chart out pathways for internal gender mainstreaming.

While we would not want to underestimate the overall value of the 2006 reader we conclude that the authors of the conceptual contributions by and large did not reflect on the implications and effects of gender-oriented research results and processes in terms of an institutional account of the NCCR North-South. The transformational power of mutual exchange between the institutional set-up, partnership processes, and research results is not valued. The authors did not take into account existing working papers such as the ones by Walter (2003) or Schubert (2005). Although all authors formulated a strong commitment to gender mainstreaming, none of them delineated a shared concept of gender, and the formulation of technical strategies dominates (see also Bieri et al 2011, in this volume). The focus is placed on why and how research itself should or can be enhanced with regard to gender issues. Not surprisingly, the synthesis and conclusion concentrates on research approaches and researchers as starting points for gender mainstreaming (Müller 2006b).

### 14.5 More of the same: gender outsourced again

Despite repeated efforts and a number of achievements in mainstreaming gender, we thus have to state that, at the end of the first four-year phase of the NCCR North-South, a coherent concept of gender for the programme's research framework and, more problematically, a debate on it were still missing. It comes as no surprise that the Review Panel, in its assessment of the full proposal for Phase 2 of the programme in 2005 (NCCR North-South 2005; SNSF 2005), criticised the lack of a coherent gender concept. In addition, the Panel proposed a re-conceptualisation of the research theme "Governance and Gender" by taking into account that (1) *gender is a transversal issue*, and that (2) *gender also refers to an issue area sui generis* and therefore should be taken up as such. Consequently, in the Phase 2 Plan (NCCR North-South 2006b), most research projects presented gender issues. However, the Review Panel in its 5<sup>th</sup> Review Report (SNSF 2006) still criticised a lacking engagement with gender: "Yet, based on the information given in the 5<sup>th</sup> progress report the panel concludes that gender mainstreaming and gender research as an analytical tool have not been fully exploited." Accordingly, one of the overall recommendations was: "Mainstream gender (again!)"

Efforts were, indeed, intensified, not least due to the Review Panel's continuous insistence. In 2006, a supportive Transversal Package Mandate (TPM) on "Gender and Development" was formulated.<sup>15</sup> Even though the TPM's terms of reference targeted (and continue to target) all programme levels in line with the strategies formulated earlier, emphasis continued to be on education and training of young researchers, mainly PhD students. Subsequently, the TPM issued guidelines for addressing gender in PAMS (Bieri 2007), a training course on gender in development research, and a training module on gender and development. In addition, the strategy for the advancement of women, which explicitly mentioned the need for gender-sensitive research from the very beginning of the programme, was implemented in this respect by offering researchers the possibility of accessing expert gender support.

All of this, however, left the NCCR North-South with insufficient resources to actively support the gender debate as a contribution to the programme's scientific foundations. Thus, it is not surprising that there are no indications of an overarching gender debate. It seems to be widely acknowledged that a gender perspective enhances project results – but gender is perceived to be either 'somehow included' or 'the task of others' (see Bieri et al 2011, in this volume). Only in one out of 46 PhD project summaries presented in the 2008 *PhD Reader* (NCCR North-South 2008b) does the term "gender" show up, it is very rare in the pre-proceedings for the International Conference on Research for Development held in 2008 (NCCR North-South 2008a), and it is completely absent from the vast majority of the regional synthesis themes.<sup>16</sup> This is astonishing, to say the least, as many of the projects deal with rapid transformation processes, social movements, and/or social change, where power and assets are redistributed and the status and roles of women are renegotiated. Gender is likewise missing from conceptual papers written within the social sciences, where one would expect it to feature rather prominently.<sup>17</sup>

In summary, we must state that in the course of the first eight years of the NCCR North-South programme, some progress has been made, but huge gaps remain in terms of a coherent gender concept, as well as a commonly shared understanding of and a joint debate on gender and development.<sup>18</sup> We argue that the NCCR North-South has fallen into the same trap as development agencies all over the world, who, by mainstreaming gender, made it the responsibility of all and thus of no one in particular – and without giving any clear indication of a concept and strategies. Hilary Charlesworth attributes the "lack of bite" of the concept to its fundamentally conservative nature: after all, the idea of mainstreaming is to go with what is considered normal,

to align something to dominant trends. Combined with “institutional inertia and resistance”, this has confined the impact of mainstreaming strategies to a rhetorical one (Charlesworth 2005, pp 16–17). To use Andrea Cornwall’s catchphrase (2007, p 70), gender underwent a transition from a “buzzword to a fuzzword”.

## **14.6 Incremental steps: strengthening gender concept, policy, and practice**

How to proceed based on these lessons learnt? A very basic understanding of gender mainstreaming would be that for an organisation committed to social action, gender equality and the promotion of power-sharing among women and men as a fundamental human right should be not just the concern and responsibility of a few, but rather an essential value held by all members of staff, as well as an integral part of all organisational systems and procedures. We also agree with Razavi (1997), who argues that discursive strategies are always highly context-specific, meaning that strategies adopted by internal advocates in one context are not necessarily the most appropriate ones for other institutional settings.<sup>19</sup> As there is no predefined route to follow, flexibility is needed to chart an independent path by means of an open and iterative process, using already existing components of an internal negotiation structure. Looking back on the first ten years of the NCCR North-South, in this respect the programme did well. We argue that, starting from an initial normative – but vague – commitment to gender mainstreaming, the issue of gender was driven by mutual exchange within the NCCR North-South research community. With a view to maintaining the momentum for organisational development – a further modification of the programme design, setting, and culture – as well as for a better conceptualisation and integration of the gender dimension, we conclude our analysis by reflecting on some strategic and conceptual elements that have a potential for enhancing gender mainstreaming within the NCCR North-South.

### **14.6.1 Strengthening gender advocates within the programme**

While the institutionalisation of a group of advocates within the programme seems a valuable strategy, we found a general statement by Mukhopadhyay and colleagues (2006, p 120) confirmed in the case of the NCCR North-South:

*[...] gender units [...] remain at the margins of the organisations – with little access to power and decision-making, limited author-*

*ity, insufficient human and financial resources and overall lack of capacity – whilst often being saddled with the explicit or implicit responsibility for mainstreaming gender in the entire organisation and its programmes.*

The gender core group operated from an isolated position, its visibility was limited, and so were effective measures. Gender papers and a largely inactive electronic platform did not allow for consistent tracing of work or results on gender as a transversal theme. The impression prevails that the discussion was driven mainly by the political interest of like-minded internal advocates – a core group within the programme that concentrated on “exchanging, sharing and discussing, especially with actors or researchers willing to contribute” (Müller 2006a, p 27). After most core group members left the NCCR North-South, having completed their research projects (mainly PhDs), the TPM found itself alone without any institutional platform for exchange on gender issues between the programme management, on the one hand, and researchers and partners in the field, on the other. But gender mainstreaming as a task cannot be limited to those already converted. In addition to providing resources to internal advocates, the programme management should become more active in a continuous exchange and join gender-advocating forces within and beyond the organisation.

#### **14.6.2 Broadening the space for an iterative process**

The commitment to gender mainstreaming is an essential element of the NCCR North-South’s scientific foundations. A transdisciplinary and partnership-based approach to research may entail and encourage openness and flexibility with respect to an iterative process conducive to gender mainstreaming. Yet, this is an underlying quality, and the support and sustained commitment of the steering and management bodies are necessary to keep the cycles of exchange and learning in motion. There must be increased recognition that “the combination of interlocking forms of oppression affects not only how women live their lives but also how they are affected by any given development research project or policy” (Beetham and Demetriades 2007, p 202). Otherwise, gender-sensitive research will hardly increase in quality or in quantity. At the programme level, the following ‘technical’ strategies are promising for supporting a broad and iterative process to enhance gender mainstreaming: increasing the visibility of gender issues; providing and institutionalising platforms of debate and using them strategically; taking up bottom-up initiatives and disseminating information; further joint development of monitoring and evaluation systems; and providing resources for

gender advocates and formulation of common strategic research projects on gender. Of importance here is the up-scaling of PAMS experiences, especially as in PAMS the external can interact fruitfully with the internal.<sup>20</sup> It is imperative that the importance of gender in transformation processes – notably a setting in which most of NCCR North-South research is done (see also Schubert 2005) – be fully acknowledged by capitalising on recent research activities and by launching joint gender research at the regional level, that is, in the eight regions in the South where research is conducted.

#### **14.6.3     Formulating a programmatic preliminary gender concept and strategies**

The fact that there are no road maps charting predefined gender routes does not mean that we can do without guidelines. Although it seems to be broadly acknowledged in the NCCR North-South that a gender perspective is a necessary means for capturing the diversity of stakeholders' knowledge systems, interests, and power positions in joint mitigation approaches, the strategies for *implementing* such a perspective have been less clear. Neither the promotional brochure *Research Partnerships for Mitigating Syndromes of Global Change* (NCCR North-South 2002/2003) nor Vol. 1 of the *Perspectives* series, on *Research for Mitigating Syndromes of Global Change* (Hurni et al 2004), nor the reader on *Gender and Sustainable Development* (Premchander and Müller 2006) – all of them presenting an overview of the NCCR North-South to a broader public – fleshed out how gender was meant to be addressed as a transversal theme. Both of the initial research projects on gender failed to establish a coherent and practicable concept; neither did they reach a wider public within the NCCR North-South community. Therefore, in congruence with programme papers focusing on sustainable development, it is imperative to encourage discussions on gender and further joint development of a more coherent concept for gender mainstreaming. Adopting a preliminary and open position towards it is crucial – even in the form of top-down directive elements.

#### **14.6.4     Going beyond instrumental arguments and strategies**

As discussed above, instrumental strategies for individual education and capacity building are at the core of the NCCR North-South. We join Razavi in rejecting indiscriminate criticism of instrumentalism, “since the internal advocate does exercise a degree of choice” (Razavi 1997, p 1112) in deciding what kind of bargaining and discursive strategies are most promising to

bring about change despite the constraints given in a specific organisation. Thus, instrumental elements used in gender training might have perhaps been more effective than a full-scope attempt to mainstream gender in a very composite programme. Nevertheless, the extent to which gender training is really conducive to promoting social change is much debated.<sup>21</sup> As Mukhopadhyay and Wong (2007, p 12) point out, gender education and training is in no way neutral, and they question the thinking behind it: “There has been little critical analysis of the thinking behind gender training, especially the epistemological assumptions underlying what is and is not being trained and how training is being thought about [...]” Addressing the knowledge agenda, they continue:

*So far from being a neutral activity, gender training, in fact all forms of training, reflects a certain understanding of the nature of knowledge, knowledge production and power. By understanding these natures within the context of training, we move towards a better understanding of power and knowledge within development efforts to promote gender equality such as gender mainstreaming.* (Mukhopadhyay and Wong 2007, pp 12–13)

As a consequence, although instrumental strategies ‘make sense’, we argue that their potential for inducing transformation remains low as long as researchers are not involved in a process of reflection on gender mainstreaming in the institutional context. Thus, opportunities to reflect on epistemological issues – including gender-related ones – within the NCCR North-South are just as important as training.

#### **14.7 Conclusion: A call for gender debate and discourses**

We conclude that the NCCR North-South programme started as a research endeavour with a normative, albeit weak, agenda-setting with regard to gender. A ‘route’ – ‘a process to undertake’ – was missing, including organisational analysis, the setting of objectives, and approaches to fostering changes (Mukhopadhyay et al 2006). But the participatory processes within the programme proved to be suited for further development of the open framework for mitigating syndromes of global change, and it was bottom-up claims that brought the issue of gender equality into organisational and research practice. This may not have led to a coherent gender concept, but it

effected concrete institutional modifications, as well as a more sophisticated transdisciplinary research design and culture.

What was missing first and foremost, however, was the debate on gender. It is misleading to tacitly assume that partners and staff share the same values from the beginning; neither will they develop a common understanding if epistemological groundings are not discussed, reflected on, and constantly adapted (see Wiesmann et al 2011, in this volume). This is crucial when it comes to gender issues. Furthermore, organisations are gendered, too, and are not immune to gender biases and discrimination; they are therefore in danger of reproducing within themselves what they intend to fight against in the societies they work in (Mukhopadhyay et al 2006). We argue that deepening the gender debate will accelerate the gender momentum within the NCCR North-South. It will create greater ownership of both the gender concept and gender practice among diverse partners and will also enable young researchers to find their own gender route. Gender concepts cannot be formulated and implemented top-down, neither by the programme leaders nor by gender experts. A critical mass of internal advocates and like-minded supporters is necessary to launch the debate and keep it going. As shown in this article, there is a need for high-level input and constant support as well as for a learning process that emerges from ‘doing and reflecting on research’, that is, the mutual exchange between theory, policy, and practice.

How to nurture the debate? First of all, we propose to take up the strategies outlined above. Having emerged from the NCCR North-South gender process, they will bear fruit if they are related to, and become the object of, a gender debate. Furthermore, we propose to link current debates in gender theory to the debate on scientific foundations within the NCCR North-South, linking up with current discourses on gender and development in the process. This could be achieved, for example, by re-thinking development paradigms and globalisation, by seeking to understand men and women as gendered beings in transformation processes, and by emphasising the inclusion of justice and power in the analysis. Such an analysis would reflect the “realisation that gender mainstreaming is necessary but insufficient for achieving gender equality” (Mukhopadhyay and Wong 2007, p 12). Indeed, we hold that an intensified debate on commonalities of and differences between gender studies and development studies will not only strengthen the NCCR North-South in terms of a critical advancement of its founding principles, but will also qualify its research community to contribute much more pertinently to gender and development discourses.



## Endnotes

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<sup>3</sup> Some of the documents used in this study were meant for internal use only and as such are not accessible to the public. They have been listed in the list of references as internal documents.

<sup>4</sup> Partners and partner institutions of the NCCR North-South are diverse and work in diverse regions and cultural contexts. Thus, they apply policies and research practices that are hybrid with respect to gender mainstreaming. Overall, NCCR North-South research results are increasingly gender-sensitive. However, research results are not discussed in this analysis of organisational change; they are examined by Bieri and colleagues (2011, in this volume).

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of this issue, see also the article by Wiesmann and colleagues (2011, in this volume) on the conceptual meta-framework of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South.

<sup>6</sup> The book *Politics of the Possible* (Mukhopadhyay et al 2006) reports on the Gender Focus Programme (GFP) launched by Oxfam Novib in 1995. This programme was designed as a six-year process of organisational analysis, learning, and change with a view to promoting gender equality in the organisations and activities of some 35 partners from seven regions around the world as well as Novib itself. The GFP was premised on acknowledgement of the gendered nature of development organisations and the interrelations between them and the development programmes they design, implement, and monitor. It was also based on the belief that tackling gender issues within the organisation is not enough to promote gender equality in programmes: the organisation itself needs to be changed. The book describes the diverse 'gender routes' developed by the organisations involved.

<sup>7</sup> Mukhopadhyay and colleagues (2006, p 14) mention similar experiences. See also DAW 2005.

<sup>8</sup> The Grindelwald Conference in 2001 represented the official inauguration of the NCCR North-South research programme. Representatives from eight partnership regions – so-called Joint Areas of Case Studies (JACS) – worked together to elaborate the core problems to be addressed in NCCR North-South research with a view to mitigating syndromes of global change. Proceedings were published in 2002 (NCCR North-South 2002). For more information on the structure and bodies of the NCCR North-South, please refer to the programme's website at [www.north-south.unibe.ch](http://www.north-south.unibe.ch).

<sup>9</sup> In the NCCR North-South's early terminology (Phase 1), a syndrome context was defined as a region or a set of circumstances in which one or more syndromes (i.e. typical clusters of problems) of global change occur or may potentially emerge. The NCCR North-South explicitly focused on selected syndromes of global change, each of them occurring in one or several of the following three contexts: highland–lowland, semi-arid, and urban–periurban (Hurni et al 2004). Though the focus on contexts and themes was maintained right into the programme's third phase, explicit mention of the term "syndrome context" was gradually abandoned.

<sup>10</sup> The NCCR North-South Review Panel provides guidance and support to the programme in scientific, administrative, and financial matters. It reports to the Swiss National Science Foundation on an annual basis with an evaluation and recommendations for the future. For more information, see <http://www.north-south.unibe.ch/content.php/page/id/130>.

<sup>11</sup> This means that the programme has been successful in terms of its technical goals – such as taking women on board. More detailed information is included in the annual reporting of the NCCR North-South. The impact of the advancement of women on the programme is not further discussed here, as it has mostly run in parallel to conceptual development of gender aspects.

<sup>12</sup> This does not mean, however, that no gender-sensitive research is conducted within the NCCR North-South. All NCCR North-South partners and partner institutions, as well as the programme's institutional bodies over the three phases of the programme (JACS, WPs, TPs/TPPs/TPMs, etc., see [www.north-south.unibe.ch](http://www.north-south.unibe.ch) for more information) have their own approaches and research projects; the inclusion of gender-sensitive research depends on the level of individual interest on the part of young researchers, the support provided by their mentors, or driving forces within partner organisations. Yet, the resonance of gender research is low among the whole NCCR North-South research community. The information upon which this statement is based has been extracted from the internally available Annual Reports.

<sup>13</sup> Partnership Actions for Mitigating Syndromes (PAMS): selected small-scale local development projects of limited duration and financial scope that constitute an innovative addition to the research activities of the NCCR North-South. Designed to address specific problems by applying research results to real-life situations, PAMS provide an empirical basis for evaluating the potential of transdisciplinary research in triggering social learning processes. See also Bieri et al 2011, in this volume.

<sup>14</sup> In addition to four conceptual contributions, the reader includes ten case studies presenting research results. These are not discussed here, since the present article focuses on conceptual aspects, whereas gender aspects in research results are discussed in the article by Bieri and colleagues (2011, in this volume).

<sup>15</sup> The Transversal Package Mandate is currently held by the Interdisciplinary Centre for Gender Studies (ICFG) based in Bern, Switzerland.

<sup>16</sup> See Hurni and Wiesmann 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Examples include Hufty's (2007) publication entitled *The Governance Analytical Framework* or Haller's (2007) work on institutions and their links to resource management from the perspective of new institutionalism.

<sup>18</sup> In the Phase 3 Plan (NCCR North-South 2010), gender seems to have gained ground in that it is also taken up in project titles. Various statements throughout the plan express acknowledgement of the fact that people-centred development is only possible when gender perspectives are identified and addressed as integral elements of all areas of work.

<sup>19</sup> Radcliffe (2006, p 525) cites True and Mintrom's (2001) analysis of 100 state bureaucracies across the South between 1975 and 1997, highlighting uneven and site-specific performance in implementing gender mainstreaming.

<sup>20</sup> For a discussion of women as driving forces in globalisation processes, see McIlwaine and Datta (2003), as well as the PAMS case study on picketing movements in Argentina (Cross and Partenio 2005; Freytes Frey et al 2006; Freytes Frey and Crivelli 2007), which is also discussed by Bieri and colleagues (2011, in this volume).

<sup>21</sup> Mukhopadhyay and Wong (2007, pp 11–12) ask questions that are also of relevance to the NCCR North-South training:

*In particular, we are concerned with a number of questions that this publication can only begin to address: (1) How are the epistemological roots of gender and development related with the knowledge and learning contexts in which gender training takes place? (2) What are the implications of building feminist knowledge and approaches, which ultimately challenge traditional models of power and knowledge, in contexts that value acquisition of knowledge over processes of learning and that subscribe to hierarchical, positivist and didactic knowledge and learning models? (3) What are the assumptions of the links between knowledge, attitudes, behaviours and practice in gender studies and training and how do these mesh with the learning and knowledge contexts of the societies and organisations where such education and trainings occur?*

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